

DOES INDIA HAVE A FUTURE ?



RAJMOHAN GANDHI

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Dr ANNIE BESANT

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Foreword

ANNIE BESANT laboured untiringly for India from 1893 until she died in 1933 at the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras. What India owes to her cannot be measured. If today the conscience of India is awake to any extent, if India's soul still animates the people's consciousness, it is in no small measure due to the endeavour of Dr Besant and her colleagues.

In remembrance of her exceptional services and the nobility of her life, the Besant Lecture was instituted in 1947, which was her birth centenary. A series of eminent people concerned with the welfare and future of India and humanity contributed their insights and thoughts through these annual lectures, many of which

were published in 1990 under the title *In Honour of Dr Annie Besant* by the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society.

The Theosophical Publishing House is now happy to bring out the latest of the Besant Lecture series delivered by Mr Rajmohan Gandhi during the International Convention of the Theosophical Society in December 1993, commemorating the centenary of Annie Besant's arrival in India. Most appropriately the subject of the lecture was the future of the India that Annie Besant loved. Mr Gandhi has given fresh life to the Besant approach by his appeal to the conscience of the Indian people. The ancient seers proclaimed that the divine Spirit (*ātmā*) is to be discovered by learning to look and listen, ponder and meditate. Can India rediscover the splendour of her soul by relearning the art of looking into her conscience and listening? Mr Gandhi's moving appeal will, I am sure, help in this process.

Adyar

17 February 1994

RADHA BURNIER

*International President
The Theosophical Society*

Does India Have a Future?

RAJMOHAN GANDHI

(A Lecture in honour of Annie Besant)

VERY few can be deserving of the honour of being asked to deliver a lecture in memory of Annie Besant. Certainly I am not. But since the lot has been drawn against my name this year, and since I did not back out when approached, I have no choice save to beseech the indulgence of my hearers and proceed.

But before I do so I bow my head in memory of Annie Besant, who loved, served and led Madras and India, whose struggles stirred the heart, whose eloquence was spellbinding, who thought and built for generations, whose footsteps continue to echo on this beautiful campus, and whose unconquerable spirit continues to inspire many a heart all over the world. Annie Besant, I salute thee!

At the US Consulate in New Delhi's Chanakyapuri, an area with broad tree-lined roads and gracious buildings, a warning in large type confronts those lining up to collect their American visas. 'This visa is valuable', says the warning. 'Do not accept offers to take you home from here. Your passport with the American visa may be robbed.' Offices that issue Indian passports do not display such warnings. It is the American visa which is seen as the passport to fortune, something that others may snatch and you must defend.

Some will remember the cartoon that appeared in August last year during the fiftieth anniversary of the 1942 movement. It showed queues of Indians outside three or four foreign consulates and was captioned, 'The Quit India movement'. The question 'Does India Have a Future?' has therefore been answered by some by the stamp of their departing feet. The scramble for forms for admission into colleges abroad and the frequency with which the phrase 'green-card holder' appears in matrimonial columns reflect a belief that other places offer a better future.

Mother India no longer retains her children. Many leaving her claim that they miss and love

her. 'We prefer,' they say, 'India's narrow lanes to the wide open spaces of our lands of adoption, India's crowds to our loneliness, even India's dust and dirt to our antiseptic surroundings. But our future is here.'

Some are less sentimental. There was this man hit by frustrations and angered by the demand for bribes who was on his way out of the country. At the airport he ran into yet another demand for a bribe. He paid it, went through all the gates, climbed the steps to his plane, turned around, faced his country for the last time, said, 'I hate you India' turned again and took his seat in the aircraft. By the time he told me this story he had grown sorry and even ashamed about that declaration of dislike, but that declaration had been made. Others too have felt a dislike for India, expressed it, nursed it. Some, as we all know, have even encased it in bullets and bombs. But the anti-India insurgents and the haters of India are outnumbered by those who are disappointed and saddened, and disappointment and sorrow are more lasting than anger.

At the end of the second world war and on India's independence, citizens of Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi were not less

confident about the future than their counterparts in say Singapore, Hongkong, Bangkok or Jakarta. Today some of these cities to India's east and south receive more tourists in a year than India does as a whole, and the Indian visitor to these places of Southeast Asia feels a little like the Indian villager boarding a bus for the city with its supposed wonders and big lights.

India is not the only country whose future is discussed with some anxiety. Of China, the economic progress of which is supposed to be uncommon, Liu Binyan, director of the China Initiative, Princeton, says that it suffers from 'spiritual deterioration and moral degradation' and 'the rampant lust for power and money' (*Foreign Affairs*, Sept.- Oct. '93)

As for the United States, the American journal *Foreign Affairs* states that 'since 1960 the US population has increased 41 per cent while violent crime has risen by 560 per cent, single-mother births by 419 per cent, divorce rates by 300 per cent and the percentage of children living in single-parent homes by 300 per cent' (Sept.- Oct. '93). I don't know whether we should feel glad that we are not alone, or sad that other nations too are burdened with doubt.

This year I had the chance to visit three countries involved in a testing and complex transition: Cambodia, Russia and South Africa. The cruelties and injustices that in the recent past tormented the peoples of these three lands engaged the attention and elicited the protest and the prayer of much of humanity. The iron lid of Stalinism, the granite wall of apartheid and the killing fields of the Pol Pot terror are now nightmares and memories rather than current events, but I saw with my own eyes the emergence of new fears, fears of ethnic, criminal and political violence, as well as fears of hands without work and plates without food. 'Will our country survive?' was a question on many lips in Phnom Penh, Moscow and Johannesburg; and the title of this lecture was suggested to me by an essay by the Russian mathematician Igor Shafarevich with the heading, 'Does Russia have a future?' in a book edited by Solzhenitsyn called *From under the Rubble*.

But is there a Russia, a South Africa, an India? The Soviet Union is no more, and as for Russia, while some of its citizens seem to think that it is smaller than it should be, others appear to be of the view that it is larger than what is

sensible. South Africa has its Blacks, its Whites, its Asians and its Coloured; it has Xhosas, Zulus, Sothos, Tswanas, Afrikaners and Britons. It also has ardent separatists. Is there, even so, such a thing as the South African nation? I cannot go into these questions today but may be allowed to affirm my opinion that there is a South Africa, and a Russia, in each case something more than the sum of its ethnic parts; and that the world as a whole has a stake in the success of the Russian and South African ventures.

Some would go beyond questioning an India, a Russia, a South Africa and a Cambodia and dispute the very value of a nation. The individual has a place in their thinking. So also humanity. But nationhood they deny or deplore. Nations create walls or wars; and a nation-state may curb its citizens. This is true enough. But individuals also build walls or start wars against other individuals; and a family may curb its members; yet individuals and families are not therefore to be denied or deplored. Likewise nations have value.

Race, religion, language, culture, history and territory may be factors in a nation but cannot separately or together explain the texture of

nationhood, a texture that seems delicate, subtle and mysterious in all cases and strong in some. It is foolish to ascribe the strength of the Japanese nation to its supposed racial homogeneity. Single tribes have not always become cohesive nations. Again, America with her numerous racial and religious groups did not become a nation merely because its founders chose one language, English in this case, as the national tongue. Religion did not keep Pakistan together, and I doubt that any declaration turning India into a Hindu state would act like a wonder drug.

I will not attempt in this lecture to unravel the mysteries of nationhood or describe its ingredients. The bonds of nationhood are better felt than described; a people that feel oneness constitute a nation and are members, tied to one another, of a national personality. Japan, the USA, England and France — each of them is a personality possessing, like a human being, a spirit as well as physical matter, memories as well as hopes, and a heartbeat as well as muscle.

Sure of their nationhood, the British who came to India were less certain that India was a nation. John Strachey's remarks are known to many: 'The first and the most essential thing to

learn about India is that there is not and never was an India, possessing according to European ideas any sort of unity, physical, social and religious. There was and is no Indian nation, no people of India, of which we hear so much.'

Our forefathers were angry at this view. They answered that the colonial British saw what they wanted to see, namely a swarm of races, tribes and castes holding nothing in common. To invent a purpose ('Uniting warring groups') to justify the Raj, they saw clashes and dissimilarities that did not exist. Theirs was a wicked denial of truth. An India existed from the start of time, the India of the rishis, the truth-perceivers who listened to the Eternal and sought to contemplate on the Infinite and who in far-flung corners of India bequeathed identical insights. These rishis had defined India and given it a oneness long before the ancestors of the British knew what a nation was. This was one response.

Other nationalist voices admitted India's diversity but ascribed nation-building value to it. Indians were dissimilar, true, they spoke different languages, looked different from one another and worshipped differently. But there was a unity in diversity, indeed unity from diversity. After some

decades of their rule, the British said yes, there now was an India, or at least a tentative sort of India, a nation united by imperialism which the empire alone could preserve. 'Just the opposite', answered India's nationalists. 'Unity can come and is coming because of the anti-imperialist struggle. You did not unite us but our fight to expel your rule is creating or recreating the Indian nation.'

A segment admitted India's divisions but said that the Hindu-Muslim one was the most significant. They saw India in the Hindu community and Indian unity in Hindu consolidation. This group had its Muslim counterpart which also admitted a Hindu-Muslim divide. It sought Muslim consolidation for a Muslim nation in India and achieved it in 1947. There were two other views of Indian nationhood. One saw and sought unity in the consolidation of all the oppressed castes, the other in the consolidation of all the oppressed classes. These days there is also the view that the market economy, the free flow of goods, services, capital and labour, will unite a nation as nothing else can, even as it will unite the globe as nothing else can. Finally we may note the view that it is not a nation that creates

the machinery of a state but a strong state that builds a nation's pride and preserves its unity.

Passionate fervour may mark the Indian nationalist of any hue but the stamp of departing feet does not cease. Sadly, the Indian air is also rent by the sounds of pain and anger — by the blast of bombs, the crackle of gunfire and the shrieks of the assailed and the bereaved.

There are now two Indias, one where the writ of the state runs and another, much smaller but slowly extending, made up of tracts in different parts of the land, where the guns of rebels hold sway. Our former imperialist rulers were foreign and unwanted but they were seen as the strongest force in the land. Also, they were non-aligned between different Indian groups; and on the whole they understood that public office was not for private profit. The authority and strength of our indigenous rulers is in question in some parts of our land; our officials and politicians have caste and community ties; and they ask what office was for if not for fulfilling family and personal hopes.

If we have a national personality, it is split. Victories do not make everyone happy, and assassinations do not make everyone sad. Our

collective memory is divided when assessing key figures from the past. Your hero is my villain, my hero your villain. Luckily this is only a partial truth. The Buddha, Asoka, the saints and poets who sang of love, devotion and compassion in all parts of India, Akbar and Dara Shukoh, to give only some examples, are honoured by all Indians; and all Indians are proud of Ajanta, Ellora, the Taj and the Qutub. But Indians do not agree about the past, on the merits of what happened, on the order of events and even on the truth of some events.

Individual personalities too may be fractured. Children of separated parents may receive conflicting versions of their family history, of the order in which painful events occurred and of the truth of the events. One set of facts is highlighted, another suppressed. One side is painted in pleasing colours, the other dehumanized. But the family did once exist and may yet with luck and wisdom find mutual contact, communication and understanding again, especially if the focus is on the victims of conflict, the children, and on the future rather than the past.

This may happen in a nation as well. Focusing on the future may make dialogue less

prickly and understanding more feasible. Individuals and families have memories but they also have hopes and ambitions. Surely this is also true of nations. Does India know why she lives? What is India's purpose? Is she merely physical space and a quantity of physical bodies, or a nation with a yearning, a role, a mission?

Purpose differs from duty. It is my duty to feed my wife and children but my purpose or role is higher. It is India's duty to feed her children and clothe and house them; this duty has tragically not been fully performed; yet India's purpose is higher, and she may find a future if she finds a purpose.

Dostoyevsky wrote:

Belief in one's desire and ability to give the world a message, and to renew it with the abundance of one's vitality; belief in the sanctity of one's ideals; belief in the strength of one's love and yearning to serve mankind — only a nation strong in this belief has the right to a higher life, only such a belief can endow succeeding generations with vitality and organic drive.

Dostoyevsky thus links a nation's purpose to mankind. Such a linkage finds both resonance and resistance in India. Resonance because somewhere in the Indian soul has always lurked a

feeling that India had something to contribute to the world, and resistance because of the enormity of India's internal challenges. The resistance has been fed in recent decades by a feeling that some Indian leaders erred in lecturing the world on peace and tolerance instead of confronting internal problems. The demand for a shift of focus from the world to India was conceded years ago. No longer does India talk of a new world order. Neither close neighbours nor distant powers are advised by us on how they should conduct their affairs. Instead the co-operation of every nation big or small is sought for combating problems in India of poverty and terrorism. However, this India-centredness has not made Indian problems more manageable.

A western professor, C. G. Jacobsen, has written with some scorn of the American creed of 'manifest destiny', Israel's belief of 'a chosen people', Russia's self-image as a 'guarantor of faith and fount of civilization', China's vision of 'the Middle Kingdom' and Japan's 'notion of racial purity and superiority'. (*Journal of Peace Research*, August '93) The idea of a superior breed or herd of people would be ugly, I think, to most of us, but a nation with a purpose, and a

nation that thinks itself better than others, are two wholly different concepts.

What are, or should be, India's ideals? There can be two approaches for finding an answer. One would locate India's strengths, the areas where we are well-endowed, seek to develop those strengths and share them with the world.

There is, for one great thing, our democracy. Sometimes, as in the very recent past, our elections are conducted impartially and peacefully. The possibility of fulfilling hopes and ambitions through the ballot keeps the bullet under wraps and perhaps saves us from the extremes of former Yugoslavia, which seemed less committed to genuine elections. At times our parliament and its committee rise above party lines, as happened with the Joint Parliamentary Commission over the stock and securities scam, and engender hope. Our economic progress has been notable in some areas and dramatic in a few. Our voluntary sector is active and growing; and our people meet hardships and hurdles with skill and ingenuity. These are only some of our strengths.

Another approach would look at ways of combating our weaknesses. If these weaknesses are shared elsewhere, then our experience would

be of value to the world. I propose to travel this second road. A doctor gaining his knowledge in a general hospital, conscious of infirmities around him, may be as useful as an advocate presenting the bright side of his case.

Looking then, at some of our ills, let us note, firstly, our great shortage of remorse. Evil shocks us but we shake off its memory. Remember the incident in Surat a year ago when women were gangraped and killed in what literally was a blaze of light focused on them? We were all duly horrified; some demands were made for the apprehension and punishment of the culprits. That was the end of the matter. We failed to see that Surat was only a ghastly extreme of a twisted and cruel sense of 'fun'. Every single day our women are liable to face mental torture and physical handling in buses, cinema halls, crowded pavements and the spectator stands of a sporting event. Wherever proximity can combine with anonymity, the Indian woman must pray and prepare herself against rough hands. After Surat, all Indian men of every background had the chance to reflect on the vulnerability of the Indian woman and the potential for evil in the Indian male.

But reflection, remorse, contrition and repentance are spiritual exercises we evade. We allowed Surat to pass us by, even as we allowed the 1947 killings, the 1984 killings in Delhi and the killings and blasts in Bombay in 1992-93 to pass us by. We did not reflect on the case with which our greed or anger turns to killing and looting. We admire Germans who are ashamed of the Nazi years and of their role at the time, and Japanese who have humbled themselves in recollection of Japanese atrocities; but we do not encourage those who commit violence in India to look into their souls. More serious than the failure of the state's investigative machinery is the sleepy state of our conscience.

Was our conscience really aroused by the 1992 stock market scam? It was not caused by old-fashioned accounting procedures or by a lack of computers. Forgeries, falsehoods and illegal favours siphoned off public money into private hands but our equanimity was not ruffled for long. No country has as many undernourished people, or the blind, or children not in school, as India, or as many hands hungry for work. Our country is ranked 146th in per capita income, and 134th by the human development index, which

gives weightage to health and education and access to resources. When these rankings were announced earlier this year there were protests, not at the hurtful realities they reflected, but at the criteria adopted for the rankings, implying that say a 124th place produced by supposedly sounder criteria, as against the 134th place announced, would provide great satisfaction.

Hideous racialism has been known in many parts of the world, but courageous voices spoke against it even where it held sway. Many whites in South Africa or the southern states of the USA looked into themselves and humbly admitted their active or passive role in supporting racialism. Have we looked squarely at the oppressions in our villages? We all know that insults, beatings and other forms of punishment are invited in many of our villages if the supposedly low-born do any of the following things: if they walk with a straight back, or wear good clothes, or wear a moustache, or ride a horse during a marriage ceremony, or are conspicuous in greeting a visitor to their village. What is the extent of the remorse, repentance or reparation, as distinct from condemnation, for the torchings, rapings, beatings and eye-gougings that have

taken place because some low-born folk acted as if they possessed dignity? Let me mention too the recent instance of an assembly of the low-born of a village that decided to behead a couple of their community because they married against the will of their elders, and went on to execute the decision. It is not, therefore, a matter of the group, high or low, into which you are born, but of imposing your will on others. 'My writ must run.' If not you pay, maybe with your life.

Those taking part in the oppression of the low-born are more our flawed brothers than our enemies, imbued with wrong notions of pride and importance. But they have not been brought face to face with their conscience, or with the hurt and humiliation they cause. As far as I can see, there has been only one instance in recent times, occurring way back in 1932, when because of Gandhiji's fast in a prison in Pune, remorse over untouchability was expressed on a large scale by the supposedly high-born. But the depth of this remorse was open to question because a fast by someone they loved rather than the stirrings of their own conscience had given it birth.

Our capacity to shake off and forget inconvenient facts is equalled by a remarkable

capacity to perpetuate disputes. We prefer litigation to mediation, and agitation to arbitration. Like Henry Ford who used to say that he did not mind what colour his car was, provided it was black, we swear that we would abide by what the court or the tribunal would say, provided it is in our favour. Years pass into decades, and decades into half a century but our disputes over sharing a river's waters, or over villages and towns lying between two states, remain alive, kicking and politically productive. Arafat and Rabin may sit together, and Mandela and de Klerk likewise, but we are made of sterner stuff. For our egos we are ready to divide our parties and even lose office. An honourable compromise is an expression we dislike. Contrary to what many would like to believe, this failing is not confined to politicians. Business houses break up, as do social organizations and trade unions, because of our failure to settle disputes.

'Our trouble', a friend said to me not long ago, 'is that we sit on the fence. We don't know whether we want the American model of individual effort or the Japanese team model.' But I wonder. Are we so indecisive? In fact we seem to have decisively rejected both models, for

we pull down the individual who does anything significant, and we also dislike working in a team. We did not make a success of socialism; what we do with a market economy remains to be seen. As for the Japanese, I have a suspicion that their socialism, if they had set their minds on it, would have been superior to the socialism of other lands, even as their capitalism has performed better than that of others. Systems seem heavily dependent on the individuals operating them.

Why is it, returning to India, that Dr Manmohan Singh's Rs 1400-a-year voluntary tax on small businessmen, accompanied by a promise of no inspections and no questions, has met with a very poor response? Mistrust of government departments and reluctance to be drawn into their orbit has come in the way, but another factor has also been at work: 'why pay when you don't have to?'

Was God absent-minded then when designing the Indian character? Is the Indian soul inferior in quality? No! No with a dozen exclamation marks! Often the Indian citizen is heroic in his or her response to the trials of every day, fighting for standing room, for elbow room, for space in

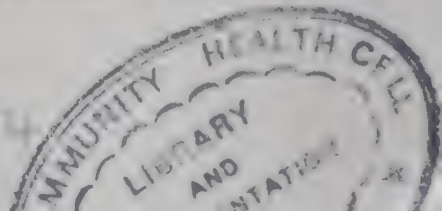
the place of work, in the home and on the way from one to the other, for a place in school or college, or for a job. Where in the world do you see greater endurance? Our failing is that we evoke one another's worst rather than best.

I will complete this look at our ills with a reference to our attitude to the Almighty. When a couple of months ago I saw two-wheelers, three-wheelers, cars and buses decorated for the annual veneration of the tools and machines that fetch our daily bread, I once more saluted, as I have done every year, the wisdom of our people in honouring what is crucial to life and livelihood. But I also realized that in addition to treating our tools as our gods, we tend to treat Gods and Goddesses as our tools. As with our vehicles and our machines, and as with VIPs, Gods are to be honoured, decorated, garlanded and placated, so that they may the more faithfully carry out our will, whether in our favour or to the detriment of our enemies. God should carry out our will, rather than the other way round.

Before seeing how this view of our ills helps in identifying India's purpose, let us consider two words that come up in any discussion of the Indian nation — blood and soil. Powerful words.

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Some hold that a true Indian, and a true Hindu, is one who regards India as homeland and holy land both. Soil is thus crucial. As for blood, its importance can be judged by the oft-heard remark that Hindus and Muslims should not find it difficult to live together for apart from a tiny percentage all have descended from the same stock.

Yet a definition of the Indian nation in terms of blood and soil cannot suggest, let alone explain, what India's purpose should be. No doubt India connotes a soil and a blood, but is India not to connote some ideals and values as well? Other nations too have their soil and their blood, to them as highly prized as our soil and our blood is to us. What are we to say to them? That our soil and blood are as good as yours, and possibly superior? Suppose they throw the same remark at us? Do nations then exist only to be graded by a new index of the quality of blood and soil?

No, and again with several exclamation marks! To blood and soil we must add spirit. India must connote a certain spirit as well.

Also, obvious anomalies arise from the homeland-holy-land definition. On my recent South African visit I learnt of a South African of Indian origin, a Hindu, who had grown so to love

his land that on returning there after travelling elsewhere he actually knelt down and kissed its soil. Is he less of a Hindu because he loves the South African soil? Is an American citizen of Indian origin, a Hindu, less of a Hindu because he is an American citizen, and less of an American because the places he regards as holy lie in India? Does the circumstance of soil make him a second-class Hindu and a second-class American citizen? Are the Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Japan to be second-class citizens of their countries because their holy places are in India?

Nirad Chaudhuri lives in Oxford on English soil. He tends that soil and has grown lovely roses on it. Has he therefore lost his Hinduness? Some years ago he spoke to me with obvious sadness of what he had heard from another Indian living in the UK. Standing with his back towards a beautiful building, this person was cursing the land of his adoption. Is this person a better Hindu and a truer Indian because of his dislike of English soil?

My mother is no doubt the world's best — for me. Likewise with blood and soil. Nor should we forget the bloodshed and the soils despoiled

in history in the name of blood and soil. Sadly, Love-thy-mother has in history pulled hate-thy-neighbour to its side, and the emotionally charged concepts of blood and soil have at times been used by evil men. In the early 1930s the German people were told, and I quote:

Religion is rooted in the 'soil' of the country and the 'blood' of its people. The national faith of Germany was strong and heroic. God intended the Germans to unite under a powerful leader, to pour out their energies for the national good, and to keep the 'Aryan' race to which they belonged free from any taint of alien blood. (Bonhoeffer, p. 95)

Shorn of values and ideals, the notions of blood and soil represent energy without direction and control. Led by the right spirit, blood and soil may enrich national feeling without threatening anyone. Moreover, the ingredient of spirit may enable all those who lack the credentials of blood and soil to play their full and equal part in the life of a nation. This is how there was none more Indian than Annie Besant. This is how Muslims and Christians, whose holiest places are outside India, may be yet as Indian as any Hindu, and Hindus and Muslims as trustworthy as anyone else in their citizenship of America, Britain or France.

It is instructive, too, to consider the criteria of blood and soil in the context of the northeast of India. The Nagas, Mizos, Ahoms and numerous other groups resident there are plainly different in ethnic stock from the residents of the rest of the country. The theory of blood and soil would set them apart. Returning from the northeast to the rest of the country, we can see that actually not one but several ethnic groups exist in India. The blood of India is as mixed as it is precious. At its core, therefore, our relationship to our nation is spiritual rather than physical.

Then there is the question of India as it used to be before 1947, or of South Asia as a whole. The removal of boundaries is a foolish and divisive aim but there is nothing foolish or merely nostalgic in the notion of a South Asia as a unit integrated in emotion but not in law. History, geography and economics favour such an integration, but in holy places and blood the peoples of South Asia differ among themselves. Their coming together can only be on the basis of shared values.

Let us now attempt to identify these values. The weaknesses we spotted in India, a failure to face facts hurtful to our pride and repent for

them, a failure to settle disputes, a neglect of the individual's role, and a wish to see God as tool or servant rather than master, also happen to be our world's ills. These ills are what have made the former Yugoslavia a soil of slaughter; they cause daily deaths between Armenia and Azerbaijan, impede solutions in South Africa and the Middle East and plunge many an African nation into feuds and dictatorships. Even the economic disputes among the G-7, the club of the super-rich countries, are not unrelated to such ills. To combat these ills is India's mission. To bring man the world over face to face with his conscience; to bring man closer to his fellow man in every corner of the earth; to evoke each man's best and noblest; to take the world closer to the justice and harmony that men may find when they make God their master rather than their servant; and to do this for the women of the world as well—this, in my humble yet firm opinion, is India's purpose.

Let us note, too, that despite all our failures, despite all that the world knows of our poverty, squalor and violence, and despite all that the world knows of the hypocrisy of some of our godmen, it still associates India with the primacy

of spirit over matter, of meditation over the rat-race, of non-violence over violence, of tolerance over imposition, of harmony over strife. The goals we have identified from our ills are the goals instinctively associated with India by our ancient rishis and sages and by many in the modern world.

But what can a statement of India's purpose achieve? 'One word of truth', Solzhenitsyn said in his Nobel address, 'is stronger than all the lies of the world.' Sometimes, however, one feels the powerlessness of mere truth or rather of truth merely expressed. True, India has also known the concept of lived truth, of truth lived out in a great and bold life, or a great and calm life. Even so India is where she is today, a sick, slow-moving giant under attack from its own limbs.

Another metaphor may help us to see the situation more clearly. Once more I borrow from the Russians. Grigory Pomerants, scholar of Buddhism and of modern Russian society, writes as follows of his country:

The present population is an amorphous mass between two crystalline structures.... It can assume a structure if an axis or a branch appears, however fragile, around which crystals will start to form. The

mass can crystallize anew into something resembling a people around a new intelligentsia. I am counting on the intelligentsia not at all because it is good. Intellectual development in itself only increases man's capacity for evil. My chosen people are bad, I know, but the rest are even worse. I do believe that the intelligentsia can change and attract others.

Going along to some extent with Pomerants, Solzhenitsyn gives the crystallizing role to a nucleus of goodness rather than to the intelligentsia. In his view, such a nucleus could form the axis or branch for the crystallization of the Russian people. He therefore calls for a sacrificing elite who would turn amorphous Russia into a nation with a shape and a purpose.

Despite our history's proud and noble moments, India too resembles an amorphous mass with scattered particles not very conscious of one another, colliding but not coalescing with one another. We too must ask who will form the axis or branch that will crystallize India's amorphous mass. The notion of a sacrificing nucleus may be of relevance here too. How is the nucleus of a new India to be formed?

Humbly and in all sincerity let me express what I believe to be the first step. It is a practical and simple step but with a moral dimension and

a spiritual fallout. The step the nucleus or the would-be-nucleus has to take is to listen. To listen to the person next to us, and to listen to our conscience. Our nation of orators waiting for audiences needs to become a nation of listeners waiting for their neighbour's words, and waiting upon the voice of the Eternal that may speak to the depths of our hearts, and to which our rishis listened.

When speaking we stand on a stage apart. We build a bridge when we listen. The doors of the human heart may close when we speak insensitively, the hearts even of our loved ones. These doors may open when we listen, even the doors of enemies or rivals. When in silence we listen to our conscience, an episode like Surat, or any similar episode that we normally shake off, registers deeply; we have the chance to feel and learn what we should, responsibility, remorse, repentance or whatever. When we listen in silence, the hurts and histories of groups other than our own also enter our hearts, and we realize that ours is not the only group that did great things or suffered much, and some other group not the only one to cause suffering. The past may begin to heal.

An old man in Bombay whose son was dragged out and killed a year ago listened. As a result he rejected the route of revenge. His thought was: 'I don't want any other father to go through what I have gone through.'

We like those who listen to us. When we were tiny our parents were alert to any sound from us and ran towards us if we sounded in trouble. They listened to us. We loved them. Listening parents retain their children, and a listening India may retain her sons and daughters. And when we listen to our conscience and wait upon the inner voice, we begin to treat God as our master rather than our servant or tool.

In short, we may help India in finding and fulfilling her mission when we listen. Also, a nucleus of listening Indians would bring closer to realization the pure hopes of every variety of Indian nationalist. They would recall the listeners and meditators of pristine India and build a bond across time. A Hindu wanting to be a proud Hindu may find that he can make no better beginning than to listen to his neighbour, whether Hindu or Muslim, and to his conscience. Listening would give him cause

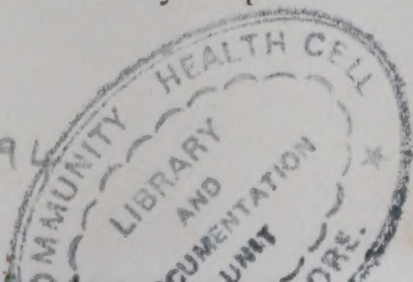
for a just pride, a pride based on sure ethical foundation. As for the votaries of a composite culture, listening would build live links between different groups of Indians without which a composite culture and a secular polity remain dry and even misleading phrases. Fighters for social and economic justice may find that listening enables them to fight without the hate and revenge which in history has been aimed at the oppressor but destroyed the victim more than the oppressor. Together, listening politicians and bureaucrats might streamline and strengthen the state as the nation's servant and sentinel. They should of course expect hurdles, slander and persecution along the way.

A growing body of listening Indians, listening to those around them and to their conscience, may prove to be that branch or axis that crystallizes the amorphous mass of scattered and colliding particles that is India today, giving both substance and a future to the Indian nation. Theirs would be a communications-revolution more significant than any other; and they might help the Indian giant to stride with kindly steps across the world.

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This, God willing, is one option. The other is for us to continue as we are, talking ceaselessly, listening only to our own voices, colliding with our neighbours, inflaming our quarrels and digging a grave for the giant that is India.





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